DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 152 201 HE 009 792

AUTHOR Lawson, Jonathan
TITLE Who Should Teach Composition: The Professional and Ethical Dilemma of Staffing.
PUB DATE Jul 77
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Wyoming Conference on Freshman and Sophomore English (July, 1977)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *College Faculty; *Composition (Literary); Composition Skills (Literary); *English Departments; *English Education; Higher Education; Instructional Staff; Professors; Speeches; Student Teacher Relationship; Teacher Attitudes; Teacher Characteristics; *Teacher Qualifications; Teaching Assignment; Teaching Assistants; *Writing Skills

ABSTRACT

Following a discussion of the advantages of having everyone in an English Department--teaching assistants, junior faculty, and senior staff--teach composition courses, specific qualities desired in a composition instructor are suggested in this speech. These instructors should include: (1) those willing to insist that students emerge from fundamental courses with more skills and more knowledge; (2) those willing to follow a syllabus that colleagues have agreed upon and to insist that their students have the opportunity to learn that material; (3) those willing to apply the doctrine of usefulness: whatever they have learned within or outside their discipline with value in a composition program must be boldly applied in an attempt to aid students in attaining basic literacies and the ensuing freedoms; (4) those willing to spend the amount of time necessary for teaching composition; (5) those willing to explore the ethos of each student writer through personal writing assignments and then assist the students in progressing to the analytical skills; and (6) those willing to share with students the joys and frustrations of their own writing. (SPG)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Jonathan Lawson
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) AND THE ERIC SYSTEM CONTRACTORS"

Jonathan Lawson
Associate Dean
Liberal Arts and Sciences
St. Cloud State University

ED152201

WHO SHOULD TEACH COMPOSITION: THE PROFESSIONAL AND ETHICAL DILEMMA OF STAFFING
Wyoming Conference on Freshman and Sophomore English, July, 1977

When I first suggested to Art Simpson that someone address the fundamental and frequently sticky problems of staffing composition courses, I half hoped for and half dreaded a letter saying, "Gee, that's a fine topic, Jonathan, why don't you say something about it." The hope sprang (and that's far too strong, too lively a term for it) from some strong feelings I've had during several years experience of trying to deal with the problems. The dread rose spectorally (a more accurate term) from my knowledge that my own strong feelings about who should teach composition have not come from any careful or comprehensive analysis but from impulse and instinct. Our solutions to staffing problems like those in many other institutions have too often been expedient ones as some sections were staffed at the latest of minutes with the first available part-time body. Knowing all the while that there might someday be an accounting for not having a sensible rationale, I have whistled my way through the grave-yard and I am even now unsure that the spirits can be quieted.

Several years ago at an English Department meeting held in a room with the atmosphere of a battle field waiting the fatal sisters, we faced the question of who should teach composition. With the teaching assistant's program reduced, the senior staff at loose ends with fewer graduate and major courses to teach, and the junior staff willing to teach anything in order to keep teaching at all, it appeared possible to involve any of those groups in the composition program. Since I suspected at that point what John Smart and Wilson Snipes later began to document about students doing equally well in a second composition course after instruction in a first by either senior staff or TA's (ADE Bulletin, No. 49, pp. 40-43), I thought it safe to ask the question, "Who should teach composition?" Some of us could teach composition or all of us could teach composition. Who should it be? From two different parts of the room came simultaneous answers: "Everyone" and "No one."

HE 009 792

In retrospect, both answers may have been right.

During the debate that ensued, I followed my impulse and argued for the first proposition-Everyone in an English Department should teach composition. Teaching assistants, junior faculty, and senior staff all have something to offer a composition program, I suggested idealistically. Those staff members who agreed with me helped me recite the familiar litany of strengths each group would provide. Since our local parliance distinguishes junior from senior staff according to who has and has not done a Ph.D., it sounded something like this: The enthusiasm, freshness, and energy of the willing TA; the experience-produced expertise of the junior staff; the authority, insight, and disciplinary richness of the senior staff-all of this might just create an excellent composition program. We knew that mixed staffing would not cause the students a problem when progressing from course to course. And we knew that the administration would be hard pressed to complain again that we didn't take composition seriously-after all, we would all teach it-Ph.D.'s and all. And the competition for upper level and graduate courses might be less disturbing if we had an area of clearly democratic life.

There was more to the argument, of course, but we finally decided that we would all do it. Everyone would teach composition. Actually, the decision was not the result of anyone's suasory powers. It was forced upon us by circumstance. What, after all, would we all teach if we didn't teach composition? With the graduate program reduced and the number of majors diminished, there was no choice.

Well, there is nothing extraordinarily new or important in all of this. What happened to us was already someone else's history and it may be the future for other institutions. Our successes and failures have been almost predictable. 1. It is true everyone in the department now understands the difficulties of teaching composition. 2. Meetings on composition now have as resources the training of rhetoricians, linguists, methods people, literary historians, prosodists, creative writing specialists, mass media specialists, and the rest: not only has the tone improved,

but the program also seems to be improving under the stimulus of our collected wits. And a great many staff members are taking the discipline seriously. 3. Politically, there is certainly a greater cohesiveness in the department. Elements of snobbery concerning composition wane and a relative democratic community of concern is growing. Even those who don't like teaching composition have a sudden and profound concern with the state of the nation's literacy and with the general betterment of the writing program. 4. A very natural alliance of need has sprung up between TA's and master teachers, thus improving TA training and teaching. In fact, TA's can wander down the hall and talk to anyone about composition. 5. The departments' image has improved in the eyes of both administration and colleagues in other departments; our sincerity when we speak of the importance of composition is no longer questioned. We have, after all, demonstrated a unanimous willingness to roll up our sleeves.

The failures are certainly as predictable. 1. Most everyone seems to have less time: less time for meetings, for scholarship, for consulting, or whatever we were doing before "the change." 2. With so many new voices and new vested interests represented in the composition program, it is far more difficult to shape the courses than when a committee wrote syllabi for the TA's to follow. 3. A number of senior staff members returning to the composition classroom after a twenty year hiatus complain of being out of touch with both students and the course material. (In most cases, that has not been as difficult a situation to manage as one might expect. Most senior staff members have been as willing as TA's to read and discuss new developments in the discipline). 4. Finally, there are without doubt the angry staff members, those who argued early that no one should teach composition. Their point was really that they should not have to teach it, but their arguments were not without sense. (a) They were trained literature specialists who were hired to teach literature. (b) They had neither the training nor the desire to teach composition. (c) Teaching composition would reduce the time available for serious work within their subject area: their speciality courses and their scholarship would suffer. Although it is possible to reply sensibly to these points,

that has not yet been done loudly enough or repeatedly enough to take effect. At best, the situation I have described provides us with a partial illustration of knots that must be untangled or cut in talking about staffing. In this individual instance where impulse, instinct, and the force of circumstance shaped policy, and I think, in the profession at large, the dilemmas have not been faced and the question of who should teach composition has not been answered.

It may be helpful to identify some of the major dilemmas in the abstract before proceeding to a brief set of guidelines offered as a heuristic device in sorting through our future. Let me review some specific problems by faculty type without attempting to say everything there is to say about composition teaching by each group.

The TA: The TA in a literature oriented graduate program is preparing for the "real work" in literary scholarship, while being partially trained in composition and spending a goodly portion of his or her time teaching it. This does seem impractical and perhaps unethical. Even with adjustments in evaluating the load taught by TA's, such as Maxine Hairston has recently suggested (ADE Bulletin No. 53, pp. 38-40), we perpetuate the artificial division between the humanistic goals of both literary study and composition teaching. 2. The TA's for all the enthusiasm about teaching are usually in no way prepared by undergraduate work to teach composition. Their preparation (like their primary graduate study) is in literature and they are far better suited to instruction in humanities and basic literature courses. That is at best inconsistent and unfair to both the TA and their undergraduate students. 3. TA basic training in composition (and there are still a few institutions which have not begun to offer substantial training) is usually concurrent with the actual teaching of composition. I doubt seriously if any of us would welcome even a gall bladder operation performed by a first quarter, first year medical student, yet the analogy is not totally inappropriate. In my mind it errs only in that it is perhaps more serious to have one's head opened up by a novice in a composition course than one's belly by a novice in an operating room.

In this situation, we are teaching the TA that professional competence is not really important and suggesting coincidentally that composition is not all that important. 4. Unless we do adjust the compensation and teaching load of TA's, perhaps along the lines suggested by Professor Hairston, we continue the financial exploitation of the TA, demonstrate a sort of moral bankruptcy on the part of the department of English and the entire institution by asking the TA's to slight either their teaching of composition or their studies, and we convince others outside the department that our espoused belief in composition is patently hypocritical.

(Permit me a digression: That hypocrisy, that dualism, that split between composition and literature is what led to our dis-ease about the appropriateness of the Ph.D. as a community college teaching degree. Tragedy ensues: TA's who buy into the split may not want to teach in a community college and shouldn't. And the community college doesn't want the Ph.D., and I certainly don't blame them. But what a terrible waste of resources and what a loss on both sides.)

Junior Faculty: (Defined now as those at lower ranks) 1. The treatment of a young Ph.D. who must do time in the department's composition program while waiting for tenure and more specialty courses is only slightly better than that of a TA. The untenured Ph.D. is expected to publish, to demonstrate visibility to justify tenuring. Yet composition <u>does</u> reduce the time available for scholarship and committee work. The double bind is like the TA's. It is unfair; it is unprofessional. 2. The situation of the MA or A.B.D. saddled with an unending string of composition assignments isn't much better. The workload <u>is</u> incredible and if the department at large holds composition in disdain, the morale will be bad. A sort of second class citizenship emerges and the effect of years of that can only lead to revolt and the establishment of a composition group or a new department in which composition is respected or to the slow spiritual and physical death of the instructor. 3. In a department where only lower level faculty teach composition, even the composition specialist is in an untenable position and a prime candidate for leading the revolution against the literature folks who control the department.

Senior Faculty: 1. The senior staff member working a literary specialty and often being supported by the composition program must live with the implications of that sort of hierarchy: that literature is more elevated and esoteric than composition and somehow more important; that literature and humanistic studies in general can exist without the free and literate public that composition, reading, and language teachers are attempting to create; that the literature specialist's time for contemplation and publishing is somehow more valuable than that of a composition specialist, and much more. 2. On the other hand, the literature specialist who is asked to teach composition may be expected, unfairly, to devote the same amount of time to literary studies-something which will not be possible. 3. Obviously many of our best scholars have neither the inclination nor the training for composition, but neither of those obstacles is insurmountable. I would not, however, be pleased to see anyone teaching composition now or in the future who simply doesn't want to.

Without completely letting go the impulse to say that everyone should teach composition, let me suggest some qualities I would seek in a composition instructor. I am assuming in these guidelines that the goals of the study of literature and composition <u>are</u> generally similar if not the same and that as humanists we are lovers and liberators, that our intent is the understanding and possible betterment of the human condition. While it would be practical to insist that teachers of composition have background and training in literature, rhetoric, linguistics, grammars, methods, the mass media and much more and optimistic to insist that they all believe in what Max Lerner calls "the joyous classroom," I would be satisfied if we as a discipline could insure ourselves that our courses were taught by the following: (a) Those willing to insist that students emerge from fundamental courses with skills, knowledge, and in general <u>more</u> than that warm puppy feeling that frequently

results from group therapy English. (b) Those willing to follow a syllabus which colleagues have agreed upon and, assuming that it states clearly the content to be learned and skills to be mastered, willing to insist that their students have the opportunity to learn that material. (c) Those willing to apply the doctrine of usefulness: whatever they have learned within or outside their discipline that has value in a composition program must be boldly applied in an attempt to aid students in attaining basic literacies and the ensuing freedoms. (d) Those willing to take from their lives the extraordinary amount of time necessary for teaching composition. That we would publish less is obvious: perhaps there is a possible resolution here to the publish or perish dilemma. If our first principle was indeed the liberation of students and our first task excellent instruction, publication would be forced into a more sensible place in our hierarchy of expectations. (Would our enterprise be any less successful or our world any less rich if at least half of our bad scholarship was eliminated?) That we would have less time for committee work is also obvious, but it might be that we could also survive without half of the committee decisions made in our departments each year. ("For God so loved the world that he did not send a committee.") That our time in community service would be reduced is also true. I am not sure that we as practioners in a discipline were ever really consulted when that was selected as the third area for faculty evaluation in the triumvirate of teaching, scholarship, and service.

We would not, I think, fish any less, or make love any less, or gossip or waste time any less-those are human essentials.

---But back to our list of those who should teach composition---

(e) Those willing to lavish on students and their reading and writing problems the same care, love, pride, and personal investment we now give scholarship. (f) Those willing to meet students as representatives of the human race who are the center of the humanistic enterprise. And in this I see a directness and depth commitment not possible through scholarship alone. (g) Those willing to explore the ethos of each student writer through personal writing assignments and then assist the student in moving

beyond narration and description to the analytical skills which are yet another part of a fully human existence. (h) Those willing to share with students the joys and frustrations of their own writing. Whether we share writing assignments with them or allow them to see our professional work or both, I think it vital that our devotion to the word be made flesh for our students.

That is not a long list of qualities for composition teachers-but long lists tend to become trivial and at the same instant exclusive.

Instead the door is open and none of this excludes any of the traditional faculty groups. Perhaps that is the place to begin. The willing humanist at any level or rank who sees the field of composition as an appropriate expression of professionalism should teach it now. No staffing patterns should preclude that. While we as a profession have begun to legitimatize composition as a genuine academic and scholarly concern, we need the voices of the specialists to enrich both our argument for composition and our programs. For if we are to preclude the withering away of literature programs and the bastardization of composition into mere services courses or remedial programs snugly fit into the back-to-the-basics bundle, we must begin to find our shared first principles. We will not find them in a retreat into specialization. We will find them as we unite the discipline of English with its richness and strength at the center of our being-the English language. There is no freedom, no power, without full mastery and control of one's language. Can we as humanists say that we are in any way being true to ourselves if we are not constantly engaging our full resources in helping students achieve that mastery?

It takes no oracular powers to see that most of our universities are moving quickly toward that critical point at which finances, enrollment, politics (both internal and external), declining literacy, cultural shifts, and the workings of chance will make business as usual quite impossible. A discipline divided as ours

has been will find itself being directed or dismantled from outside. Task forces, subgroups at MLA, NCTE, or 4 C's will have neither time to discuss it nor power to change it. We will, I am afraid, find ourselves being told who will teach composition by boards of regents, legislatures, administrations, and the like- and we'll not like that. And as that sort of pressure grows we'll make a most unseemly scramble to do something to save ourselves, to stay in business.

That is, I suppose, a rather grim view from a distant prospect overlooking the discipline of English. We need not, however, pretend to be innocent victims awaiting time's worst efforts. We need only see ourselves as competent, disciplined humanists whose work is teaching our language and its literature. We'll not be condemned for that. But if we continue to ignore the common ground shared by language and literature, to specialize ourselves, to worship our hierarchies and perpetuate our snobberies, then we as a recognizable profession will probably cease to be, mourned mainly by ourselves.

Now obviously we are not all doomed unless we all teach freshman composition, but I suspect that in the process of saving ourselves more of us will. More of us should.